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ABSTRACT

The principal stimulus for language policy in Australia since 1990 has been economic development, particularly for promotion of international trade. Surveys show that Australian industry tends to be hesitant to enter new markets, and to focus on markets in the English-speaking world despite low growth potential. However, business and industry are beginning to acknowledge benefits of language skills and seeking to employ people having them. Surveys of industry language skill requirements suggest that where these requirements exist, they reflect high expectations that are not clearly articulated. Better specifications for vocational language needs and better methods for assessing them are needed. In addition, more language-learning resources should be made available to the business community. Greater emphasis must be placed on practical proficiency, a challenge encountered even in business schools that provide language training. A shortage of qualified language teachers also exists. In Australia, two primary policy thrusts should be: (1) refocusing of language education policy on quality, especially the attainment of useful levels of language proficiency, and (2) training language teachers to provide this proficiency level. Provision of self-supporting language services, such as telephone interpreting, to small and middle-sized companies would also be beneficial. Contains 13 references. (MSE)

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# Languages in International Business: Some Implementational Issues

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## The Economic Motivation

The principal stimulus for language policy in Australia since 1990 at least at the level of political rhetoric has, rightly or wrongly, been economic development with emphasis on the contribution that language skills and cultural understanding can make, in particular, to more effective trade. While acknowledging the broader reasons for language learning and *the potential of language skills to contribute to individual, community and national development* [DEET 1991a: 1], the Australian Language and Literacy Policy, for example, stated in 1991:

> *Australia must develop proficiency in languages other than English... to enable Australia to strengthen its international trade position....Selling value-added products is dependent, among other things, on the careful articulation of the products' benefits in ways which are comprehensible to our potential trading partners. It also depends on the formation of effective networks. We have "got by" in the past with English, but in a more sophisticated and competitive global market-place and with the shift in our trading partners away from countries where English is spoken as a first language, this is no longer adequate in bilateral trading negotiations. Advanced secondary and tertiary economies are characterised by a greater preparedness to invest in human resources, including training the workforce in the major trading languages.* [DEET 1991a: 23]

In his Foreword to the policy, the then Minister for Employment, Education and Training, stated:

> *We must increase our strength in languages other than English in order both to enrich the intellectual and cultural vitality of our population, and to help secure our future economic well-being.* [John Dawkins in DEET 1991: iii]

The National Asian Languages/Studies Strategy for Australian Schools had as the first of its terms of reference:

> *..the importance of the development of a comprehensive understanding of Asian languages and cultures through the Australian education system if Australia is to maximise its economic interests in the Asia-Pacific region...* [COAG 1994: i]

It would be easy to look at Australian industry and say that it is largely unaware of the values and real economic benefits to be drawn from the use of relevant language skills and cultural knowledge. Surveys of Australian industry and interviews with industry leaders reveal a profound ignorance of such benefits and even a denial that any such benefits exist or are possible [cf. the interviews in ALLC 1994: 51 - 94; Stanley *et al* 1990]. Such views as those conveyed by many industry leaders in the interviews reported in *Speaking of Business* [ALLC 1994] seem to be predicated on the assumption that English is the language of international business and most educated Asians speak it fluently. However, knowing some English, speaking it fluently, and identifying with propositions put to them in English are all very different things. A recent survey reported in *Education Australia* but taken from the *Kyoto Newspaper* in April 1996 indicated that only 60% percent of Japanese university students believed that they could handle any more than introductions or greetings using English, only 3% had confidence in their understanding of English, and only 11% felt that they could conduct business in English [*Education Australia*, Issue 1, 25 June, 1996: 2]. In such circumstances, which are probably little different in many Asian countries, any Australian company that thinks it can "get by" in English will be at a serious disadvantage compared with competitors who employ staff able to communicate in the language of their target market.

Surveys have shown that Australian industry is characterised by timorousness when it comes to new markets, a timorousness that belies the belief that Australian industry can "get by" in English. Many surveys have shown that Australian companies, when asked where they see their future export development occurring, indicate that they see their main markets expanding in their established markets and very frequently in the English-speaking world, even though, in many cases, the latter markets had the lowest growth potential. Thus, for instance, a survey by the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry [1995] in relation to Australia's trade with APEC, found that a substantial majority of Australian companies trading with APEC believed that their company's future expansion would be with the English-speaking countries in APEC even though the countries with the greatest growth (and hence import) potential were the non-English speaking "Asian tiger" economies.

Despite this, there are some signs that Australian business and industry are becoming more aware of the benefits derivable from language skills and are seeking to employ people with language skills. In recent years, for example, the inbound tourism industry has several times sought government approval to bring in some 5,000 Japanese tour guides (a retrograde step if it had been approved because of its effect on Australians seeking to use their Japanese skills but one that does indicate that the operators were anxious to have staff able to use Japanese). Furthermore, surveys of newspaper job vacancies from 1980 to 1992 have shown a 4000% increase in the number of advertisements for jobs outside of education seeking people with skills in languages other than English [ALLC 1994: Appendix 3]. Despite such striking figures and the dramatic increase in industry language provisions in countries such as Britain, one can ask why opinion surveys amongst Australian industry suggest that it remains unconvinced and whether language policy that has been supportive of the role of languages in industry is not breaking down at the implementational level. The rest of this paper will briefly consider a very few issues pertinent to these questions.

**Identifying and Articulating Language Needs**

One of the striking features of surveys of industry's language skill requirements is that, where language skills are called for, the expectations seem to be very high. The inbound tourism industry's call for 5000 native speaking Japanese tour guides illustrates the problem since it is virtually certain that a proper needs analysis would suggest that the range of tasks that tour guides of different sorts carry out could be performed by personnel at a range of different proficiency levels, in many cases well below native speaking proficiency. The problem seems to be, especially as one tries to interpret the job advertisements, that industry lacks the ability to identify its actual needs and lacks the tools by which to articulate those needs. For this reason, the Australian Language and Literacy Council in *Speaking of Business* recommended that some exemplar audits of representative industries or enterprises be conducted, that, where appropriate, vocational competency specifications include specifications for language and culture skills, and that a framework of language competencies be developed for Australian industry analogous to the British *National Standards for Languages* produced by the Language Lead Body in 1992 [ALLC 1994: 96-7, 20].

The Australian Language and Literacy Council also recommended in *Speaking of Business* that a system of accredited language assessors be established (more or less analogous to the NAATI system) which would ensure that industry could draw on appropriately trained personnel for the conduct of language audits, needs analyses and skills assessments [ALLC 1994: 96-7]. In addition to increased availability of trained and certified personnel, there is need for more language-in-industry centres or export language centres to be available at least on an interim basis as reference points to which enterprises may turn to obtain assistance with language audits, needs analyses, and advice or training on the language and culture issues to be considered in entering new markets.

**Quality of Language Skills Available**

If industry is to recognise the value of language skills and employ persons with them, it is essential both that the education system produce people with those skills and that means be provided by which persons who have acquired their language outside the formal education system be able to have their proficiency and specialist skills assessed, certified and accredited for vocational and educational purposes [cf. ALLC 1994: 96]. The latter need would be facilitated by the system of accredited language assessors just referred to. The implications of the former, ensuring that the education system produce people with usable skills, are far-reaching and include, as the two most fundamental requirements:

- the need for courses to be proficiency-oriented, to set practically and vocationally useful proficiency goals, to attain them, and to state course outcomes in meaningful proficiency terms that, where appropriate, are related to vocational competency requirements; and

- the need for teachers themselves to be proficient, with good language teaching skills, and, in at least some cases, with experience in using the language in business and industry.

Regrettably, too many language courses fail to produce graduates with practical language skills and, not only in Australia but in the United States, university language departments have been slow to change, slow to recognise the centrality of proficiency, and slow to develop and offer proficiency-focussed courses that integrate language learning with vocational programs. In the United States, one result of this phenomenon has been that, while some major business schools such as Thunderbird or Wharton, have excellent language programs, many business schools have abandoned their fellow university departments and have opted for courses from such commercially oriented schools as Berlitz [see Ingram, in preparation, for further discussion].

A recent Australian Language and Literacy Council report *Language Teachers: The Pivot of Policy* [ALLC 1996] highlights the issue of language teacher quality and supply, one of the great deficiencies in Australian language policy-making and implementation. The Council accumulated a massive amount of data (in excess of 700 pages of it) but had to conclude that basic information on enrolments, teacher numbers and teacher quality was not available in any form that enabled the Council to gain an accurate picture of the state of language teaching in Australia but, reviewing numerous reports as well as extrapolating from its own and other available data, the Council had to conclude that the teacher quality and supply situation was catastrophic, that there had been no effective attempts to comprehensively address the teacher supply problem, and that, to match teachers to the student target numbers in the various national, State and Territory language policies, a five-fold increase in language teacher numbers would be required from 1995 to 2003. Yet this highly conservative estimate was built on an assumption, known to be wrong by some 80%, that all language teachers in 1995 were language proficient and with specialist language teacher training. There is no likelihood that such immense teacher supply targets could be reached, the quality implications for language courses are depressing, and it is not surprising if industry is sceptical about the usefulness of the skills generated by the education system.

Thus, whatever else may be needed, there are two fundamental requirements if Australian industry is to benefit from a supply of useful skills in other languages and cultures. First, there must be a dramatic re-focussing of language education policy on quality, especially on the attainment by language learners of useful levels of language proficiency. Second, in order that the first requirement be attainable, urgent attention must be given to the provision of high quality language teachers in sufficient numbers to match the inevitably (if regrettably) reduced student target numbers set by national, State and Territory language policies over the next decade. In addition, teacher education institutions will have to become much more flexible in the structure of language teacher training programs to enable a greater variety of people to train as language teachers, including more native speakers from the community and more people with industry experience, since there is no conceivable way in which the present reliance largely on Year 12 exiting students to train and enter language teaching can meet the projected needs.

**A Useful Supplement**

Clearly any realistic assessment of the contribution that language skills can make to business and industry in Australia over the next decade has to be attenuated by the overwhelming teacher quality and supply problem and one has to look at other expedients. In addition, the nature of Australia's predominant exporting sector means that it is unlikely that many companies will be able either to train their own staff in language skills or to exercise enough speculative flexibility in their employment policies to take on significant numbers of people with language skills. The principal reason for this is that a large part of Australia's export earnings comes from small and middle-sized companies that do not have the resources to take staff out of their regular work for the extended period required to develop useful levels of proficiency in any language, let alone in Japanese, Chinese or Korean. Consequently, it is necessary to turn to other possibilities to persuade companies that there is value in using language skills and to provide them with an economical means by which to do so. One such possibility is the notion of a telephone interpreting service more or less modelled on the AT&T Language Line service in the United States. Though there is no time to discuss this proposal in detail here, a supplementary paper is available that discusses in some detail the Language Line concept and its usefulness in Australia [Ingram 1996]. Suffice it to say here that Language Line is a highly efficient, economical and hugely successful telephone interpreting system, initiated in 1982 by Jeff Munks when he was a police office in Monterey, California, taken over in 1989 by AT&T, and now generating more than $25 million annually with a 20% annual growth, and catering for more than 150 different languages. The essence of Language Line is efficiency (callers are connected to an interpreter on average within 50 seconds and never more than 3 minutes), economy (calls average about $16.00), and quality of service. Individuals can use Language Line with calls charged on their telephone bills or credit cards while companies can take out a modest subscription which is credited against their call charges. Jeff Munks provides evidence that confirms the usefulness of Language Line not only as a valuable service in itself as companies, emergency services or individuals try to deal with people who speak a different language, but also that shows the profoundly educative effect Language Line has. Munks has shown that, even in companies that were reluctant to subscribe, usage figures grow steeply, drop off slightly when it becomes more economical for them to employ their own in-house interpreters, and then go on growing again as their business diversifies and they enter new language areas. There is a strong case for the provision of a self-funding, commercial service such as Language Line in Australia, either as a new service or, desirably, by reforming and combining existing telephone interpreting services to make them more commercial in orientation, more efficient, with higher quality control in regard to both interpreting itself and the efficiency of the service, and focussing not only on the domestic needs but also on servicing the needs of export companies and the huge potential market for such services in the linguistically diverse Asia-Pacific region.

**Conclusion**

This very brief paper has attempted to touch on some important implementational issues for a language policy that is wholly or partially driven by economic aims. It has stressed the need for more attention to the practical skills that students going through the education system acquire, the need for urgent attention to the supply of teachers capable of teaching to the high proficiency goals required if industry needs are to be met, the need for industry to receive the tools and personnel assistance it needs to identify and articulate its language needs, and the desirability of providing alternative ways of making language skills available to industry. The value of language skills to Australian industry is potentially immense but its realisation is heavily dependent on the education system's dramatically increasing the quality of skills it generates in learners and on finding ways of better utilising the substantial skills that already exist in the Australian community.

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